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SUBJECT: LAO SENIOR OFFICIAL DISCUSSES RELIGIOUS ISSUES

Ref: Vientiane 0167

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED: PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

1. (SBU) Summary: Following up on the Ambassador's recent meeting with the Lao Front for National Construction (reftel), Poloffs met with recently-appointed Religious Affairs Khaophone Vannabout to seek updates on several outstanding cases. Khaophone provided an update on 12 detained Khmu who may be "reeducated" and released soon, although no information on the case of missing Mr. Khamstone is yet available. Khaophone outlined plans for a major seminar on religion to be held during May and followed by inspections carried out by central-level officials which may help limit the propensity of local officials to claim religious violations in local disputes. The Embassy plans to follow this process closely. End Summary.

Planning A Major Seminar

2. (SBU) PolOffs met April 20 with Khaophone Vannabout, Director of Religious Affairs for the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) - the mass organization charged with supervising religious and ethnic affairs in Laos. Khaophone remarked that most religious problems in Laos involve Protestants, specifically members of the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) (even though the LEC is an approved religious group within Laos). He mentioned that during the next month the LFNC will hold a nation-wide seminar for representatives of all four approved religions (Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, and Baha'i) to review religious rights given under the Constitution and in the law and to discuss resolving religious problems. Local officials such as district chiefs, district police chiefs, LFNC district-level representatives, and other relevant governmental agency representatives will also be invited to attend and to take back lessons learned to be applied locally. (Note: this seminar will be Khaophone's first significant activity since becoming the LFNC Religious Affairs Director earlier this year.)

The 12 Khmu

3. (SBU) Khaophone told Poloffs that LFNC President Sisavath Keopbounphanh had called in the head of the Religious Affairs Section from the Vientiane Provincial LFNC Office earlier on April 20 to report on the situation of the 12 ethnic Khmu detainees in Vientiane Province. LFNC President Sisavath urged the provincial LFNC representative to work closely with the Hinheup District Chief to resolve this issue. The provincial LFNC representative reported to Sisavath that provincial and Hinheup district officials are organizing training (reeducation) for the 12 Khmu to become familiar with government policy on religion including Prime Minister's Degree No. 92 on Religious Freedom. When the group completes the "reeducation" course, the 12 should be released.

Education to Resolve Religious Problems

4. (SBU) Khaophone also discussed with Poloffs problems in general he is finding at the local level. In a few cases, local officials

and even some heads of religious congregations try to use religion for their personal benefit. If local officials do not like someone because that person is a religious believer, the officials may accuse the believer of violating rules or laws and have the person arrested. (Note: Local officials have used provisions against unlawful gatherings, or undermining social stability, or even spurious accusations as extreme as drug trafficking.) Khaophone said that LFNC President Sisavath is paying significant attention to this issue. According to Khaophone, President Sisavath instructs his staff to try to solve problems peacefully by educating people to respect the law and regulations as well as training local officials to respect religious believers. Immediately before Khaophone's meeting with Poloffs, LFNC President Sisavath met with Khaophone and insisted that the Religious Affairs Department work quickly not only to solve the problem of the 12 Khmu but also to have a clear agenda for resolving other religious problems by June.

Mr. Khamstone's Case

15. (SBU) Asked by Poloffs about the case of Mr. Khamstone, an employee in Oudomxay Province of the American-owned company Natural Products Inc. who has been missing since January, Khaophone said he had asked Mr. Chittaphong, Vice President of the Oudomxay Provincial LFNC Office, to find out the reasons for the arrest and the lengthy detention. Chittaphong has not yet replied. After the major seminar the LFNC will hold in May, central-level LFNC officials will pay inspection visits to the provinces. Khaophone himself will visit Oudomxay as well as Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Luang Namtha Provinces to learn more the local situations and look for ways to address the religious problems occurring in these areas - not only Khamstone's case in Oudomxay but also the problem of the confiscated church in Dong Nong Khun Village in Savannakhet. Once these inspections are completed, the LFNC will report the results to other GOL agencies - including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs so MFA may inform the Chief of each diplomatic mission, including the U.S. Embassy.

Comment

16. (SBU) Although much religious practice (especially Buddhism but also Catholicism, Islam, and the Baha'i faith) takes place in Laos without significant difficulty, religious problems involving Protestant groups repeatedly erupt in five localities: Vientiane, Oudomxay, Bolikhamxay, Luang Namtha, and Savannakhet Provinces. The Embassy continues to push the GOL to resolve individual cases - the 12 Khmu and Mr. Khamstone for example - through the MFA and the LFNC's Department of Religious Affairs both formally through official meetings including that of the Ambassador reported reftel and also via regular informal phone calls. We look forward to hearing the results of newly-appointed Director Khaophone's nation-wide seminar and the follow-on inspection process by LFNC officials. If the problems facing local Protestants result in part from a lack of understanding by local officials, perhaps it is not only the 12 Khmu who need reeducation. This seminar may help.

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